

Special Studies and Evaluation

Office of Policy and Evaluation California Department of Education

Effective Elements Promoting High Achievement in Districts and Schools Serving Predominately Low-Income Middle and High School Students

Purpose of The Study

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is conducting this evaluation study under a contract from the California Department of Education (CDE). The pur-pose is to identify *effective*, *replicable characteristics and elements that promote*, *result in*, *and sustain high student achievement among predominately low-income students in middle and high schools and districts with large proportions of low-income students*. The study pays particular attention to the remediation of reading deficiencies. (The terms "low-income district" or "low-income school" that appear subsequently refer to those districts and schools serving large proportions of low-income students.)

The evaluation will provide information about the following issues for decision and policy making:

- Effective characteristics and elements that increase and sustain the learning and academic achievement of students in low-income districts and middle and high schools
- The potential replicability of the identified character-istics and elements by like districts and schools
- The costs and affordability of implementing the identified characteristics and elements
- District policies that initiate and sustain academic success of low-income middle and high school students

Length and Cost of The Study

The evaluation study will extend approximately 21 months, from June 15, 1998 to February 29, 2000. CDE is providing \$460,000 for this work.

Context for The Study

Despite numerous programs in the past to improve student achievement in schools serving predominately low-income students, little information is available statewide about the success or impact of these efforts. The state's Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) has studied the program elements and costs of partnership academies, charter schools, and continuation high schools. Although the LAO has found success among some of the schools in these categories, little is known about strategies to assist low-income students in particular.

A recent three-year study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (Stringfield *et al.*, 1997) ¹ evaluated the impact of 10 highly reputed "special strategies" to raise the achievement of low-income students to national averages. Findings included the necessity of adherence to coherent program designs as well as the critical nature of district policies supporting these programs. Effective programs for low-income students in middle and high school were much harder to identify than for elementary school. *No* programs at the secondary level were identified for students who either cannot read or who read substantially below grade level.

There are other factors indicating the need for this study. The California State Board of Education is alarmed by high percentages of the state's low-income middle and high school students unable to read either at all or at grade level. In addition, both the Univer-sity of California and the California State University systems want to work with the K-12 system to raise students' academic achievement levels and to eliminate the need for remedial university courses in analytical reading and writing skills or

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¹ Stringfield, Sam, Mary Ann Millsap, and Rebecca Herman. Urban and Suburban/Rural Special Strategies for Educating Disadvantaged Children: Findings and Policy Implications of a Longitudinal Study. Johns Hopkins University and Abt Associates under contract for the U. S. Department of Education. April 1997.

mathematics for the large percentages of entering students who do not meet min-imum standards on placement exams.

Central Questions to be Answered in The Study

With an intended audience of the CDE, the State Board of Education, the Governor's Office, the State Legisla-ture, educators, parents, and the public at large, the study focuses on the following four central questions:

- What elements or program characteristics make the identified districts and schools effective in raising the achievement of all students enrolled, and of low-income students, in particular?
- 2. What are the costs associated with programs and policies in these high-performing low-income districts and schools? Are the costs affordable for similar districts and schools that may desire to replicate such programs and policies?
- 3. What district policies support these highachieving, low-income middle and high schools?
- 4. What are the characteristics and elements of instructional practices in identified districts and schools that help low-income students reach grade-level performance in reading?

Study Design

AIR will collaborate with both CDE research and program staff in conducting the study. An Advisory Group, composed of stakeholders from pertinent state offices, school and district administrators and teachers, middle and high school students, parents, and school board members, will meet with AIR at least twice during the study.

AIR is using the following four approaches to obtain data to analyze in response to the study's four

evaluation questions: (1) identify a special sample of 160 schools using extant data describing student achievement levels and school-community characteristics; (2) survey sampled schools to gather information related to the type and nature of reading supports being provided to students; and (3) visit 20 schools to observe classroom practices, conduct interviews and focus groups with staff, students, and parents, and survey staff and students regarding their teaching-learning approaches and sense of community at school; and (4) prepare cost analysis of the effective elements identified. In addition to ongoing progress reports, AIR will prepare and disseminate a final report of study findings.

AIR expects to release the final report of this study in February 2000.

Individuals to Contact about The Study

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This summary was prepared by Special Studies and Evaluation (SSE), Office of Policy and Evaluation, California Department of Education. The summary and other information about SSE services and products are located on the Internet at www.cde.ca.gov/ope.

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